

STORY BY ORVILLE F. DESJARLAIS JR. ★ DESIGN BY LUKE BORLAND

MAINTAINING THE PAST

RESTORED VINTAGE AIRCRAFT KEEPS TUSKEGEE AIRMEN STORY ALIVE

Capt. Matthew Quay couldn't believe it. He learned about a PT-13 Stearman biplane that had been involved in an accident and was for sale. Since the former B-52 Stratofortress pilot had always wanted a Stearman, and the only way he was ever going to afford one was to buy one that was wrecked, he bought it in 2005, sight unseen.

He fulfilled a life-long dream. He parked the biplane at his home in Shreveport, La., while stationed at Barksdale Air Force Base, La. He began restoring the vintage aircraft that was primarily used from the 1930's through World War II.

Curious about its origins, he sent the aircraft's tail number and Army serial number to the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB, Ala.

Archie DiFante, an archivist with the historical agency for 20 years, searched through aircraft assignment records stored on microfilm and came

up with something rather surprising.

"Archie called and said, 'You're not going to believe this, but your PT-13 was once assigned to the Tuskegee Institute,'" the captain said. "I was in shock."

Mr. DiFante verified that Captain Quay's PT-13 Stearman was assigned to the Tuskegee Army Air Field, located at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Black fighter pilots used the aircraft for training during World War II.

Of the more than 10,000 PT-13 aircraft built until 1945, some of those aircraft were assigned to the Tuskegee Institute, where nearly 1,000 black pilots, bombardiers and navigators used them for training.

The captain knew about the Tuskegee Airmen, having met one in high school during a ceremony. However, his wife, Tina, knew nothing about the Tuskegee Airmen.

"Although I attended a good high school and college, I had never heard of the Tuskegee Airmen," she said. "I found out that that is not unusual. It's sad to know that they worked so hard and were so brave, yet so few people know what they did."

As young men, Tuskegee Airmen volunteered to become America's first black military airmen. The U.S. Army Air Corps contracted with Tuskegee University to train the military aviators. Once the aviators graduated, they became members of the all-black 332nd Fighter Group, called the "Red Tails" because of the unit's aircraft tail markings. The group was noted for its excellence in providing bomber escort service during World War II.

"There is no question that the 332nd [FG] was an excellent unit that provided exceptional service during the war, as stated in a presiden-

tial citation," said Dr. Charles O'Connell, the Air Force Historical Research Agency director. "The fact that they did all this in the face of institutionalized segregation makes their accomplishments even more remarkable."

After Captain Quay and his wife realized they had a piece of history on their hands, their dream expanded.

With their minds set on a new dream, the captain and his wife began to restore the wrecked PT-13.

"We decided that this project was more than just my dream to own and fly a biplane,"

Capt. Matthew Quay stands in front of his restored PT-13 Stearman biplane. Captain Quay restored the former Tuskegee Institute aircraft after buying the wrecked plane sight unseen.

Captain Quay said. "After we renovated the plane, we decided to use it to teach others about the 'Red Tails.' It's such an awesome story to talk about. They were men who had so many cards stacked up against them, yet they not only performed, but they exceeded all expectations. Their combat record and heroism was remarkable."

His respect for the Tuskegee Airmen helped fuel his hobby.

"It was a hobby that turned into a passion and pretty much consumed everything in my life except my wife," Captain Quay said.

He and his wife worked on the aircraft every day, anywhere from four to seven hours, then

12 hours a day on weekends. Neither remembers how many hours they sanded, painted and varnished. He'd even worked on the aircraft during his lunch break.

After two years, the renovation project was 99 percent complete, and then Captain Quay received orders to Creech AFB, Nev., to become an MQ-9 Reaper pilot. After the move in 2007, he had less time to complete the renovation, but he persevered. He finally finished it in February.

During what was supposed to be its maiden flight, the propeller didn't work, and the aircraft suffered some engine problems. They are currently trying to make it airworthy. Once it is, they plan to fly the aircraft to air shows and use it to teach the public about the Tuskegee Airmen.

Meanwhile, the aircraft has been causing quite a stir in the Las Vegas area. A local news crew interviewed Captain Quay, as well as the wife of a Tuskegee Airman. Tina listened from the sidelines.

"When I heard her speak, I got goose bumps and cried when she told her husband's story about racism," Tina said. "It was really moving. She was able to share a story about some smart people who are really deserving of recognition."

It's a story that she and her husband plan to share with the nation, one air show at a time, with the help of their restored vintage PT-13.

Spirit of Tuskegee

Capt. Matthew Quay sits inside his restored PT-13 Stearman biplane. Captain Quay restored the former Tuskegee Institute aircraft after buying the wrecked plane sight-unseen. Nearly 1,000 Tuskegee pilots, bombardiers and navigators trained with the PT-13s.

photo by Lance Cheung



MOTON FIELD
TUSKEGEE, ALA.
U.S. ARMY PT-13D
AIR CORPS SERIAL NO

CREW WEIGHT 400 LBS.
SERVICE THIS AIRPLANE WITH 70 OCTANE FUEL
IF NOT AVAILABLE 100-80-100-5-1 WILL BE
CONSULTED FOR EMERGENCY ACTION
SUITABLE FOR AROMATICS

photo by Lance Cheung



photo by Capt. Matthew Quay

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